

Why The Marine Corps Still Needs Chaplains

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Why the Marine Corps still needs chaplains
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Some secularists believe that military chaplains are a violation of the separation of "church and state". This attitude has been evident as recent as 2002. Michael Newdow filed a lawsuit contending that paying the two Congressional chaplains to pray in Congress is a violation of the constitutional ban on government establishment of an official religion¹. Military chaplains have constantly been the focus of this rhetoric. In actuality, chaplains provide the military much more than just prayer and religious services. The Marine Corps will always need chaplains because they provide an excellent role model for Marines, they make significant contributions to family and unit readiness, and they bridge the gap between the Marine and the command.

A Role Model for Marines

A Marine views a chaplain's actions as the epitome of moral, ethical, and Godly standards. From the time a chaplain completes seminary until the day he retires, he is dedicated to God and lives by His principles. "Thou shall not lie" and "love your neighbor as yourself" are just some of the Godly principles that Marines observe in the everyday life of a chaplain. The Marines observe a person that is devoted to God and lives by His word. The mere presence of a chaplain has a positive effect on the Marines. In fact, many Marines find the altruistic traits of a chaplain worthy of emulating. The chaplain must uphold the

most moral and ethical standards because the unit follows his example.

Family Readiness

Supporting families is probably the most important aspect of the chaplain's job. A Marine will perform better if he is not distracted by family problems. Through the Key Volunteer Network, chaplains interact with Marines and their spouses and provide counsel as needed. A Marine and his family have confidence that the chaplain can fix many issues that will arise. Counseling the individual Marine, or his family, greatly helps to alleviate problems that may affect the Marine's mindset.

During deployments, the support a chaplain provides the Marine and his family is invaluable. Family issues that develop are more difficult to handle due to separation and minimal communication. The chaplain bridges the gap between Marine and spouse and provides the necessary support to lessen the problem. Assisting Marine spouses with problems at home is essential to the mental readiness of the Marine.

Unit Readiness

Through counseling and assisting Marines and their families, the chaplain builds a better environment for the unit commander. The quality of interaction the chaplain has with the Marines can significantly enhance the unit as a whole. Brigadier

General John C. Arick states, "A chaplain is the commander's ace-in-the-hole. Used properly, he can make a command; improperly, he can break it. He [is] the commander's eyes and ears into the soul of his command (professional confidentiality notwithstanding)..."²

The unit commander can utilize the chaplain as a sounding board, as well as a counselor. Due to the interaction the chaplain has with the Marines, he brings a unique perspective and insight to situations a commander faces. Through this interaction, the chaplain can enlighten the commander of the overall morale and potential issues within the unit. Colonel Michael J. Williams, a former Commanding Officer of Marine Aircraft Group 26 says, "Chaplains can be a source of info to the Command and a gauge of morale. Chaplains can spot problems before they become crises; but only if [the Commanding Officer] and chaplains communicate."³.

Bridging the Gap between Marine and Commander

The chaplain interacts with individual Marines and their families on a daily basis. No other individual in the command can claim that distinction. The chaplain also interacts with the commander of the unit on a regular basis. This interaction makes the chaplain the only individual qualified to identify issues specific to the Marines, their families, and the command.

Lieutenant General Martin L. Brandtner recommends, "The chaplain

should be the [Commanding Officer's] right-hand man. He should meet with the [Commanding Officer] daily to discuss issues/policy. Chaplains save souls. By example, they help Marines. They provide substantive help to Marines who need wise counsel."⁴

As early as 1979, there has been an attack on the constitutionality of military chaplains. The constitutional ban of the government establishing an official religion is being twisted to apply in this situation. Many atheists believe that the chaplains serving in the military are indisputable proof that the government is promoting a specific religion. Joel Katcoff and Allen Weider brought this very issue before the Second Circuit Court stating that the military "would be better served by privately funded and controlled civilian chaplaincy programs."⁵

This argument overlooks the fact that military personnel are American citizens and have the constitutional right to freedom of religion. One of the tenets of the Chaplain Corps is to meet the religious needs of like faith groups. This requires the military to utilize chaplains to accommodate personnel from diverse religious groups. Due to the various religions in the military, there is no basis for the assertion that the government promotes one specific religion.

The Second Circuit Court dismissed the civilian chaplaincy issue outright. It ruled, "...a civilian-run and privately-funded chaplaincy is unworkable, especially in combat"⁶. For military personnel to exercise their right to freedom of religion, especially during combat, a chaplain is required. A civilian chaplaincy meets this need during peacetime, but cannot during combat. A professional chaplaincy is the only viable solution.

Conclusion

A military chaplain provides many tangible and intangible benefits to a unit. Chaplains embody a high moral and ethical standard that is contagious to the unit. Through counseling and assisting Marines and their families, the chaplain continues to keep Marines focused on their jobs. The chaplain also works alongside the commander to determine potential institutional and family problems that can affect the unit. Bridging the gap between the Marine, their families, and the command is an essential task of the chaplain. Whether during war or peacetime, the chaplain allows the Marine Corps to continue to win conflicts both home and abroad.

Notes

1. Jim VanderHei, *Washington Post*, 31 August 2002.
2. Warren Dane, "Commander's Personal Observations Regarding Chaplains", www.ifca.org,
<<http://www.ifca.org/Chaplain/Military/personal.htm>> (8 January 2005).
3. Warren Dane, "Commander's Personal Observations Regarding Chaplains", www.ifca.org,
<<http://www.ifca.org/Chaplain/Military/personal.htm>> (8 January 2005).
4. Warren Dane, "Commander's Personal Observations Regarding Chaplains", www.ifca.org,
<<http://www.ifca.org/Chaplain/Military/personal.htm>> (8 January 2005).
5. E. R. Geehan, "For God and Country: The History of a Constitutional Challenge to the Army Chaplaincy", *Journal of Church and State*, (1997):241, *Highbeam*, (1 January 1997).
6. E. R. Geehan, "For God and Country: The History of a Constitutional Challenge to the Army Chaplaincy", *Journal of Church and State*, (1997):241, *Highbeam*, (1 January 1997).

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- Dane, Warren, "Commander's Personal Observations Regarding Chaplains", [www.ifca.org](http://www.ifca.org/Chaplain/Military/personal.htm), [<http://www.ifca.org/Chaplain/Military/personal.htm>](http://www.ifca.org/Chaplain/Military/personal.htm) (8 January 2005).
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- VanderHei, Jim. *Washington Post*, 31 August 2002.